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DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS  
BEFORE THE  
THE HOUSE VETERANS' AFFAIRS COMMITTEE  
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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the three reports to Congress that the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) completed in response to the requirements of Section 613 of Public Law 106-117, the Veterans Millennium Health Care and Benefits Act.

This portion of the Act required the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to contract for an independent study to address the one-time repair needs at each national cemetery maintained by NCA; the feasibility of making standards of appearance of active and closed national cemeteries commensurate with the finest cemeteries in the world; the number of additional national cemeteries required to meet future burial needs of veterans until 2020; the advantages and disadvantages of using flat grave markers and upright headstones in national cemeteries; and the condition of flat grave marker sections in national cemeteries. Logistics Management Institute (LMI) was selected as the independent contractor for this study. The scope and objective of the study was developed in consultation with professional staff members of both the House and Senate Committees on Veterans' Affairs, and with representatives of the major Veterans Service Organizations.

The results of the study required by section 613 were issued in three separate volumes:

- Volume 1: Future Burial Needs
- Volume 2: National Shrine Commitment
- Volume 3: Cemetery Standards of Appearance

These reports serve as valuable tools for the Department by providing data for use in our planning processes. I appreciate this opportunity to explain how VA is using the information to meet its mission today and in the future.

One of NCA's statutory mandates is to maintain our national cemeteries as national shrines. A national shrine is a place of dignity and memory that declares to the visitor or family member that each veteran who rests within is honored for his or her sacrifice. Visitors should depart feeling that the grounds, the gravesites and the environs of the national cemetery are a beautiful and awe-inspiring tribute to those who gave much to preserve our Nation's freedom and way of life. The commitment of our Nation is to create and maintain these sites as national shrines, transcending the provision of benefits to an individual. As national shrines, VA's cemeteries serve

a purpose that continues long after burials have ceased and visits from families and loved ones have ended.

### **Standards of Appearance (Volume 3)**

The Cemetery Standards of Appearance study addresses the feasibility of establishing standards of appearance for our national cemeteries commensurate with those of the finest cemeteries in the world. The study serves as an independent reference guide that will assist VA to ensure that the overall appearance of each national cemetery reflects the distinction of a national shrine. The study took into account expected differences between active and closed cemeteries.

The combination of research, visits, and interviews by LMI resulted in the identification of several elements of appearance. Such elements include the appearance and condition of burial areas and other landscape features as well as the condition and appearance of headstones and grave markers, the location and impact of monuments as a visual focal point, and the conduct of active burial operations. LMI noted that while “overall visual impact distinguishes some cemeteries as ‘finest in the world’,” they did not find a “single cemetery that qualifies for that distinction on all elements of appearance.”

NCA is using the report to review and validate its current standards. NCA began the formal effort to develop a set of operational standards and measures for key cemetery operations in 1999. A working group of senior NCA managers met to review LMI’s recommended list of standards. This working group compared LMI’s list of standards to those already in place in NCA and is developing recommendations for appropriate changes to NCA’s standards.

### **Facility Condition Assessment (Volume 2)**

The National Shrine Commitment report provides the first independent, system-wide, comprehensive review of the condition of assets at 119 national cemeteries. The new Ft. Sill National Cemetery in Oklahoma, which opened in November 2001, was not included. The study requirements directed the contractor to recommend projects that would ensure a dignified and respectful setting appropriate for each cemetery’s age, climate, topography, and available burial options. Projects were identified through comprehensive on-site assessments at each national cemetery. Assessments were conducted by teams of building architects, landscape architects, and engineers using a Field Survey Checklist developed in collaboration with NCA that incorporated both VA and industry standards for burial sections, landscape features, roads and buildings.

NCA is currently evaluating the 928 identified projects and developing a strategy to address the report’s findings. The contractor provided an extensive database with its assessment and cost information. NCA will use that data to develop a matrix for prioritizing projects that takes into account the problem category, and the condition

rating to determine the severity of problems within each category. NCA will also evaluate the recommended repair processes. In some cases, recommended solutions involve materials and processes that, while achieving the same results, are different from NCA's established methods. NCA will review these alternative methods for cost effectiveness and long-term benefits.

One result of the study that NCA identified is that the largest number of projects and the greatest potential cost are in the area of "Visually Prominent," the category where burial section renovation and headstone and marker alignment and cleaning projects are found.

Over the past year, some of these projects identified in the report received funding and others were completed. Since fiscal year 2001, \$15 million has been appropriated for gravesite renovation and repair projects as part of NCA's National Shrine Commitment initiative. The President's budget request for fiscal year 2003 includes an additional \$10 million. This funding, and the work it accomplishes, will be considered against the list of projects identified in the report. In addition, NCA will be able to address many of the projects through its 5-Year facilities planning process.

As NCA continues to review its long-term maintenance plans for its cemeteries, it will consider the fact that very few of the repair projects identified in the study are "one time" requirements. The care and maintenance of cemetery grounds and facilities are cyclical in nature and requires continuing efforts. This is especially true for the maintenance of burial sections to include cleaning and realignment of headstones and markers.

The information provided in the National Shrine Commitment report will assist VA in making appropriate and timely project decisions for repair needs at national cemeteries. As a result, VA will ensure that our cemeteries continue to provide the dignified and respectful setting that our veterans deserve.

### **Planning Process for Establishing National Cemeteries**

One of VA's primary missions is to assure that the burial needs of veterans are met. In support of this mission, NCA's goal is to increase service delivery by providing veterans and their families with reasonable access to a burial option in a national or state veterans cemetery. In fiscal year 2002, 74 percent of veterans were served by a first interment option in a national or state veterans cemetery within 75 miles of their residence. NCA expects to increase this percentage to 85 percent by fiscal year 2007.

VA's priority for new national cemeteries is to identify geographic locations with the greatest veteran need for a burial option. VA uses concentrations of veterans who are not currently served by a burial option within a 75-mile radius of their residence as the determining factor for where a national cemetery should be established. VA then works with private or other government entities to identify a multiple number of

possible sites. VA always considers land at Federal facilities within the underserved geographic area that has been deemed excess and is suitable for a national cemetery. In the past, VA has received land transferred from other Federal agencies; for example, VA received 982 acres from the Department of Army to establish the Abraham Lincoln National Cemetery in Elwood, Illinois, which opened in 1999. Regardless of how VA acquires additional land, either through Federal transfers or real estate purchases, the overriding factor has been to provide effective service to veterans and their families.

Once several sites are identified within the specified geographic location, a site evaluation team considers a wide variety of factors to survey a site's potential, such as topographical features, sufficient acreage size, and the surrounding land use. As the list of potential sites is narrowed down to the most favorable locations, environmental assessments are conducted and a preferred site is then recommended to the Secretary.

### **The Nation's Veterans Burial Needs (Volume 1)**

The findings in two reports to Congress, one completed in 1987 and a follow-up completed in 1994, have been the basis for planning new national cemeteries. The use of these veteran demographic studies has been extremely helpful in providing a framework for VA's planning and budget processes to work effectively toward meeting the unserved needs of our Nation's veterans. Each report identified the geographic areas in the United States with the greatest need for burial space for veterans based on concentrations of the veteran population. The Future Burial Needs report is the third demographic study completed to assist the Department in its long range planning.

The Future Burial Needs report provides an assessment of the number of additional cemeteries that would be required to provide service to 90 percent of veterans within 75 miles of a cemetery beginning in 2005 and projecting out to 2020; this is consistent with the study parameters required by Section 613 of Public Law 106-117. In order to meet this 90 percent service level, the report identified 31 locations as those areas in the United States with the greatest concentration of veterans whose burial needs will not be served by a cemetery. It also provided an estimate of the costs to construct, staff and equip a new cemetery.

The demographic projections in the report were provided by VA's Office of the Actuary through a statistical model. The model estimates and projects the veteran population nationwide using updated 1990 census data and Department of Defense data. It also considers annual separations from the armed forces, annual projected veteran deaths, and interstate migration figures.

VA will continue to maintain a 75-mile radius as an appropriate service area standard in order to meet the 90 percent service level mandated by the Millennium Act. Substantial documentation exists to demonstrate that 80 percent of burials in national

cemeteries come from within 75 miles of the cemetery. VA acknowledges that there are a number of factors that could impact travel to a national cemetery. Some of these are geographic and some reflect the challenges found in densely populated metropolitan areas. For this reason, accessibility to a potential site is carefully considered when choosing a new cemetery's location in order to maximize access for veterans and their families.

VA determined that a veteran population threshold of 170,000 within a 75-mile service radius would be appropriate for the establishment of a new national cemetery. This is consistent with decisions relating to the location of recently opened national cemeteries. This threshold is responsive to our commitment to serve as many veterans as possible by placing cemeteries in locations of the greatest population density.

VA has not established a veteran population threshold for the awarding of grant funding for new state veterans cemeteries. VA will continue to encourage states through the State Cemetery Grants Program (SCGP) to expand service capacity of open state veterans cemeteries, to establish cemeteries to replace national cemeteries that are depleting their inventory of first interment gravesites, and to establish new state cemeteries in unserved areas.

As directed by VA, LMI prepared the report using the assumption that VA would not be able to expand or extend the service capability of existing national cemeteries. This assumption was used because it was not possible to predict what cemetery expansion opportunities could take place in the future. NCA has and will endeavor to continue to maintain available service at existing cemeteries either through the acquisition of additional land or construction of columbaria to optimize available land. Because VA has been able to identify opportunities to extend the life of several national cemeteries projected to close, 6 of the 31 locations listed in LMI's report will not require new cemeteries.

## **National Cemeteries**

VA's role in providing a final resting place for veterans was expanded in 1973, when 82 national cemeteries were transferred from the Department of Army. Since that time, we have actively worked to expand the number of burial sites and provide a wider range of burial options for our Nation's veterans and their eligible family members. Since 1973, we have established 17 new national cemeteries and increased the system's capacity by over 10,000 acres. We have expanded the use of columbaria to provide additional burial options to veterans and their families. We have established a partnership with the States to increase service delivery for veterans through the State Cemetery Grants Program. Nearly 18 million veterans are now served by a burial option in a national or state veterans cemetery.

There are currently six geographic locations where VA is establishing new national cemeteries, as directed by Section 611 of the Millennium Act. VA is proceeding with

developing new national cemeteries near the following locations: Atlanta, Georgia; Detroit, Michigan; South Florida; Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and Sacramento, California. All six new cemeteries are projected to be open by the beginning of 2006. These six cemeteries will provide service to over 2 million veterans.

We have also been able to begin operations at new cemeteries while construction is underway by developing "fast track" burial sections. A "fast track" section is a small-scale development separate from the major construction project and allows for burials to begin during construction of the cemetery. Such a section was dedicated at the Ft. Sill National Cemetery (near Oklahoma City, Oklahoma) in November 2001.

Based on the threshold limit as well as the locations recommended by the report, VA would plan for three additional national cemeteries by 2020. This includes one in Sarasota County, Florida to ensure continued service delivery when the Bay Pines National Cemetery closes due to the lack of any additional land for acquisition. The remaining two cemetery sites in Birmingham, Alabama and Columbia/Greenville, South Carolina will provide a burial option in areas not currently served by any national or state veterans cemetery within 75 miles. Three areas identified above the threshold will not need a new national cemetery based on opportunities to acquire adjacent land at Willamette National Cemetery (Salem, Oregon), Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery (St. Louis, Missouri) and Ft. Sam Houston National Cemetery (San Antonio, Texas).

### **Cremation Options**

VA considers a cemetery *open* if it provides for the first interment of casketed or cremated remains. A cemetery is considered closed when there are no longer first interment options even though burial operations continue with the interments of family members in already occupied graves. At the end of fiscal year 2002, 87 of the 120 cemeteries were open to either full-casketed or cremated remains of first family members as well as subsequent family members.

We recognize that cremation is not considered to be an acceptable burial choice for everyone and NCA keeps its cemeteries open for first interments of casketed remains when possible. At the end of fiscal year 2002, 12,358 acres or 89 percent of NCA land is in national cemeteries that offer all burial options. However, the choice of cremation continues to increase in private as well as national cemeteries across the country. For example, the Cremation Association of North America projects that the national cremation rate will increase from its actual rate of 26 percent in 2000 to 40 percent in 2010 and to 49 percent in 2025. Some areas already exceed the national average. In 2000, the regional average for the West Coast was 54 percent. For fiscal year 2002, NCA's cremation rate was 37 percent of all interments performed and we project this number will increase consistent with the national trend.

## **State Veterans Cemeteries**

State veterans cemeteries date to before the Civil War. States have always been partners with the Federal government in providing for the needs of military veterans. With regard to veterans cemeteries today, VA has focused on keeping national cemeteries open as long as possible, developing available land as needed, and establishing new cemeteries in large metropolitan areas identified in demographic studies of the veteran population. The partnership between VA and the States improves service to veterans living in smaller urban areas and remote, rural areas, by establishing, expanding and improving state veterans cemeteries. VA provides the funding for design, construction and--in the case of new cemeteries--initial equipment. The States provide the land and the operational and maintenance costs.

The VA State Cemetery Grants Program (SCGP) was established in 1978 to complement VA's network of national cemeteries. Grants may be used only for the purpose of establishing, expanding or improving veterans cemeteries that are owned and operated by the State. VA can now provide up to 100 percent of the development cost for an approved project. VA does not provide funds for acquisition of land.

Cemeteries established under the grant program must conform to VA-prescribed standards and guidelines for site selection, planning and construction. Cemeteries must be operated solely for the interment of service members who die on active duty, eligible veterans, and their spouses and eligible dependents. The administration, operation and maintenance of a VA-supported state cemetery are the sole responsibility of the State. VA is authorized to pay a "plot allowance" of \$300 to a State for expenses incurred in the burial of an eligible veteran without charge. To date, VA has awarded 123 grants totaling more than \$148 million to establish, expand or improve 64 State veterans cemeteries in 29 states plus Guam. Fifty-eight State veterans cemeteries in 27 states and Guam are now operational. At the present time, the SCGP has 36 grant requests in various stages of development.

VA plans to use the demographic data in the Future Burial Needs report to work with the States in order to assist them in locating state veterans cemeteries in the most advantageous sites. VA will continue to maintain a very active outreach program with the States as well as be available to answer questions from State officials. VA will work closely with all State Directors of Veterans Affairs to meet the burial needs of veterans.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. I will be pleased to respond to any questions you or the Subcommittee members may have.